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Soviets Savor the Fruits of World Power

As Military Balance Shifts, SALT Is Unlikely to Curb Their Appetite

BY ERNEST CONINE

During the eight weeks that have passed since the signing of the second strategic arms limitation agreement, the debate over Senate ratification has proceeded with all the vigor, openness and diversity of opinion that we like to think is characteristic of a democracy.

No such debate is taking place in the Soviet Union.

There are no articles in Russian newspapers debating whether the SALT II agreement would add to Soviet security or subtract from it.

There are no citizens' groups demanding to know why new missiles are still being developed and deployed when, Lord knows, the Soviet rocket forces already have enough warheads to destroy the United States a thousand times over.

And there are no Russian-speaking George McGovern's, complaining that SALT II does not stop the arms race at all—and that the insatiable appetite of the Soviet military-industrial complex is really at the heart of the country's economic problems.

The absence in the Soviet Union of open, two-sided debate on SALT or any other issue is hardly news, of course. But it has a substantive importance.

Opinion polls show clearly that most Americans favor arms control. But they also reflect an unwillingness for the United States to accept a position of military inferiority to the Soviet Union.

It has become increasingly obvious that the Senate's way of reconciling these views will be to ratify SALT II, but only on the condition that the Carter Administration commit itself to redressing a military balance that, in Henry A. Kissinger's words, "is beginning to tilt ominously against the United States."

This is a galling development for people who understandably feel that a growing defense budget is out of sync with what arms control treaties should be all about.

As a practical matter, though, U.S. defense spending cannot decrease as long as Soviet military outlays continue to go up. So the key

question is whether there are any signs of Soviet interest in genuine arms reduction.

Soviet leader Leonid I. Brezhnev has suggested that the answer is yes. And maybe he means what he says. But if you look at the forces actually at work in Soviet society, it is very difficult to believe that the Kremlin has any such present intention.

The first thing to understand is that, while the Soviet military establishment is subject to the ultimate party control, it exercises an influence in Soviet society that goes far beyond anything enjoyed by the "military-industrial complex" in the United States.

Beginning with Stalin's five-year plans of the 1930s, the armed forces and the armaments industry have had first call on money and skilled manpower. Military needs are the dominant consideration in allocating resources among scientific research projects.

There are 125 so-called military higher schools, which means that one out of seven college-level educational institutions is an officer-commissioning school analogous to West Point.

According to U.S. scholars, the defense establishment has 45 representatives on the Central Committee of the Communist Party. The defense minister sits on the ruling Politburo, and the defense sector sprawls over eight separate ministries in the government apparatus.

In short, the military is well-placed to advance and protect its interests—a fact that helps explain why military spending accounts for about 13% of the Soviet Union's gross national product, against a 5% figure for the U.S. defense budget.

There is no such thing as an arms-control agency, with independent access to classified data, in the Soviet power structure. Nor are there any civilian "think tanks" empowered to question military assumptions about weapon requirements.

The military and the political leadership enjoy a basically comfortable relationship in which each supports the goals of the other.

The American CIA has warned that, SALT notwithstanding, Soviet military spending can be expected to continue increasing indefinitely at a rate of 3% to 5% a year. And why not?

The Soviet economy is in a mess. The Russian brand of communism no longer excites many people inside or outside the Soviet Union. But a continued military buildup promotes to translate into political influence that cannot be attained in any other way.

As a well-placed Pentagon source observed, "The most credible danger is not a deliberate nuclear attack against the United States; it's the perception of Soviet superiority gives to the Russians.

"Even five years ago," he said, "it was unimaginable that the Turks would have made Soviet approval a condition, as they have now done, for allowing American planes to use Turkish airspace to police SALT II."

"Another sign of the times," he continued, "is that the Norwegians asked West German troops to stay home when the Russians objected to German participation in NATO maneuvers in northern Norway."

Fred Ikle, former head of the arms-control agency, foresees even more serious consequences stemming from the shifting power balance.

Writing in Fortune a few months ago, he noted that in 1973, during the last Arab-Israeli war, President Nixon alerted U.S. forces as a signal to Moscow of American determination in the crisis.

"In another U.S.-Soviet crisis," Ikle noted, "it could well be the other way around. The President might receive the chilling news that the Russians had alerted their nuclear forces first."

"At that point," he added, "the suppressed fear of nuclear war would suddenly dominate our thinking"—and make it very difficult for an American President to call a Soviet bluff.

It is conceivable that the Russians would settle for a genuine balance of power, with lower defense budgets all around, if they were convinced that the alternative was a genuine arms race with an aroused America that the Soviet Union couldn't possibly win.

That day would come a lot sooner if the Soviet system provided for the sort of open debate on military spending plans that is routine in Western democracies. But it doesn't.

So why should the Soviet leaders call off a game that is beginning to pay such gratifying dividends in terms of Russian ego-satisfaction and enhanced political influence?

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